

Luke 16:19-31

September 29, 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Many of you know I began running again this past spring so as to lose a few pounds and get in shape for hiking in the mountains of Montana on our upcoming summer vacation. I bet many of you drove past me while I was running along the sidewalk of Main Street from home to the high school or back. A few times I might have looked up and waved; however, I suspect more often than not I didn't even notice you were there. When I run, I tend to lose focus on things around me, which probably isn't the best thing from a safety standpoint. Nonetheless, my vision is often set on the pavement just before my eyes. Perhaps, it's that phone pole or crack in the sidewalk in the distance that is my goal to get to so that I can walk for a few steps and catch a breather or perhaps it just that inward focus of pushing beyond the ache and tightness in my calves that set-in a few blocks ago. Whatever it is, at times it's as if I am in my own little world I have created, and I have simply become oblivious to life around me.

This may have been what happened to the "rich man" in our parable. He had become so enamored with the "good" things in life; royal purple attire, fine linens, and sumptuously feasting day in and day out that he has failed to see what was directly before his eyes. His neighbor Lazarus laying at his gate, covered with sores and longing, like a dog, for a few scraps to come his way from the rich man's abundance. Even the dogs are more attentive to Lazarus' needs as they come and lick his sores perhaps relieving his discomfort temporarily.

Yet, Jesus has seen Lazarus as he makes it a point to give him a name; unlike, the rich man. Perhaps, the rich man didn't completely fail to see his neighbor as he does request Abraham to send Lazarus to come to his aid by placing cool water on his tongue thus relieving the agony he was currently experiencing in a grand reversal of fortunes that Jesus' teaching continued to emphasize. You can almost hear his earlier sermon on the mount in Chapter 6 somewhere in the background:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.”
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.”
“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:21-21, NRSV)

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.”
“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.”
“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.” (Luke 6:24-25, NRSV)

And maybe that’s the impetus of what Jesus is getting out in this parable. When have we seen our neighbor; but, not really seen them? We may have witnessed the sores on their body be it hunger, illness, homelessness, lack of means to needed healthcare or prescriptions, unemployment, being made the butt of all jokes, imprisonment, suffering from abuse, addiction, unemployment or something else and then just walked on by. When have our eyes have been focused squarely on our own wants and needs and we have held onto the gifts God has entrusted us with and not utilized them properly for kingdom work because we have clung to a false sense of hope and security they bring?

Unlike last week’s parables, which were so obscure scholars were all over the board on possible interpretations, this one today seems quite clear and that makes us uncomfortable as Jesus’ parables were meant to do. Sometimes his parables were over the top exaggerations that were to be wake-up calls and stir us from our complacency and the idols we create; be they fame or fortune, status or security, a fancy house or as many churches fall privy too – a budget focused more on the building than on mission.

Somewhere I heard it said or read that Luther once stated, “While you can’t help all your neighbors, you can help the one lying at your gate.” It seems to be a direct reference to this parable and more than likely was in a sermon he preached

on this text. It begs the question for us, as a congregation, to ask ourselves on a regular basis, “Who is the Lazarus lying just outside our gate?” Perhaps, we have seen him but walked on by. Perhaps, we have missed out on an opportunity for a rich and meaningful relationship with another precious child of God. Perhaps, we have been fearful of a shrinking budget that we just don’t think we can help.

Time and again I go to conference after conference and hear one more story of a congregation seemingly destined to close their doors due to declining membership and slumping budget. I heard that story again this past week while in Des Moines. The presenter, a professor at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, spoke of a small church in a suburb of St. Paul who had been blessed some years ago with a rather large endowment. For some time they had ridden the security it offered – being able to keep the doors open, a pastor on staff, current on all their bills, and basically continue with the status quo even as member after member grew older and died and the pews on Sunday morning became more empty until finally the church council and congregation took another approach.

They realized they too had lost focus. Their eyes could only see the short section of sidewalk ahead of them and not the world around them. So, moved by their love of Christ and their confidence in Him to lead them forward, they decided to forego all committee meetings, all other activities other than worship, and focus on one mission at hand. Go out! Serve wherever they could and spend the abundance of riches they had been entrusted with doing so. Go out and meet the Lazarus lying at their gate. Go out and truly see the community God had set them in. Go out and proclaim the good news that Jesus has freed them. Freed them from worrying about their eternal future and freed them to simply serve the neighbor at their doorstep. They took a chance, let go of the stranglehold money and fear had on them, and went out into the community and guess what happened? Yep, the doors are still open. New relationships were formed and steadily the pews filled up with people they didn’t see previously. People they may have passed by. But not anymore. They were now their friends. Brothers and sisters in Christ.

New relationships had formed. New life was in the air. Joy, hope, love and resurrection were at hand. Jesus Christ was in their midst and it was his grace that

stirred them to action. It was his mercy that gave them renewed hope. It was his love they responded to. It was his light that opened their eyes to the world and the Lazarus' beyond their gate. Their hope was not found in money but rather their hope was set squarely on Jesus Christ! That's our hope as Easter people! Amen.